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Subject: Texas complains about cost of meeting pollution standards

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AIR POLLUTION

Texas complains about cost of meeting pollution standards

Sean Reilly, E&E News reporter

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The head of Texas' environmental agency is attacking long-standing procedures for meeting national air quality standards only two weeks after one of his employees won appointment to an EPA advisory panel that helps set those standards.

Strategies "to help nonattainment areas attain and maintain compliance ... can have numerous adverse impacts," Toby Baker, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, wrote in comments posted yesterday on the website regulations.gov.

Among those adverse impacts, Baker pointed to the expense to state agencies of coming up with compliance plans, adding that meeting tighter standards can also hurt economic growth. He also cited studies suggesting that money spent on regulations could be better used to directly enhance people's safety and health.

Under the Clean Air Act, EPA is supposed to regularly review and, if needed, change the air quality standards for ozone, lead and four other "criteria" pollutants. Aiding in those reviews is the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, a seven-member panel named by the EPA administrator.

Baker's comments came in response to a June invitation from EPA for public feedback on how the committee, usually known by its acronym CASAC, should consider "any adverse public health, welfare, social, economic, or energy effects which may result from various strategies for attainment and maintenance" of the standards.

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The committee will be closely involved in two assessments of the standards for ozone and particulate matter. On Oct. 10, acting EPA chief Andrew Wheeler named five new members to the CASAC, including Sabine Lange, the section manager for the Texas agency's toxicology division.

Lange did not immediately reply to emailed questions this morning asking whether she shares Baker's views and plans to raise them in her position as a CASAC member. A TCEQ spokeswoman also had no immediate response when asked by email today whether Baker has instructed Lange to raise his concerns during the review process.

The Texas agency was a frequent foe of Obama-era environmental regulations. Three years ago, for example, Michael Honeycutt, director of TCEQ's toxicology division, helped spearhead a workshop that strongly challenged the scientific rationale for tightening the ozone standard from 75 parts per billion to 70 ppb. Honeycutt now chairs the Science Advisory Board, another influential EPA panel.

The agency's June request for feedback came a month after then-Administrator Scott Pruitt laid out new guidelines for conducting reviews of the air quality thresholds. While Pruitt portrayed the new process as a needed streamlining, critics see it as an attempt to undercut protection of public health as the guiding priority in deciding whether tighter pollutant standards are needed.

The deadline for comments was this past Wednesday; while only a handful of filings have thus far shown up on Regulations.gov, there is often a lag between the time comments are submitted and when they are publicly posted.